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Living with Moral Issues

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principles. Their idea of principle is misleading. Following right principle means the faithful doing of the first four and the last six commandments. In obedience to these divine commands, we eat the flesh and drink the blood of Christ, appropriating all that is embraced in the atonement made on Calvary. Christ will stand by the side of all who receive Him as their Saviour. To them He will give power to become the sons of God.¹⁷

John as symbol met Jesus the Substance, and that which threatened disaster or impediment resulted in the prophet's attaining fuller knowledge of his God and his place in God's scheme of things. So for the latter day heralds of a coming King, standards and policies can be a way of reflecting our journey with God. Following them, however, in disjunction from God is to follow Jesus Christ with our *feet* rather than with our *hearts*.

Endnotes

- 1 James D. Morrison, Editor, *Masterpiece of Religious Verse* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1948), p. 242.
- 2 William E. Hordern, *Layman's Guide to Protestant Theology* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1975), p. 134.
- 3 *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, X, (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1966), p. 1285.
- 4 Millard J. Erickson, *Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), p. 163.
- 5 A. Berkeley Mickelson, *Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1963), p. 265.
- 6 Henry A. Virkler, *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), p. 184.
- 7 Richard Davidson, *Typological Structures in the Old and New Testaments*, Unpublished Th.D. dissertation (Berrien Springs, Michigan: Andrews University Seminary, 1981), p. 111.
- 8 Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages* (Mountain View: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1940), p. 101. (Emphasis ours.)
- 9 Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, VIII (Mountain View: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1984), p. 332.
- 10 Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings* (Mountain View: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1943), p. 716.
- 11 Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages*, p. 102.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 101.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 220. (Emphasis ours.)
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 217.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 101.
- 16 J. David Newman, "Standards Define Relationships," *Ministry Magazine* (October, 1989), p. 18. Newman discusses with examples of what he considers three levels on which behavioral standards exist, namely: absolute, temporal, and cultural.
- 17 Ellen G. White, *Our Father Cares* (Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1991), p. 270.

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LIVING WITH MORAL ISSUES

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Melanie works at a very prestigious firm and holds a highly responsible, respectable position, and has been recognized several times with honors and awards. Her integrity and faithfulness to Christian principles earned her a good name at all levels, from the CEO to the last worker in the enterprise.

Lately she has noticed her immediate supervisor cheating on investment funds, making a lot of money at the expense of the company and the shareholders. What should she do? Blow the whistle? But how? How do you blow the whistle in a loving and redemptive way? If she remains quiet she will not discharge her responsibility, and besides, she will feel like a cheat herself. If she does speak up she will lose many friends, perhaps even her job, and potentially hurt her career, her marriage, and her family.

Melanie is faced with a moral issue. But how do we know that? When is an issue a moral issue? What Melanie's colleague is doing may not be illegal, and no one would find out if she cooperates. But her conscience is uneasy. In order to handle her situation with love, firmness and adroitness, she needs to be clear on two points.

1. She must be able to discern the moral aspects of this complex situation from the legal or the morally neutral ones. This distinction is essential for devising the right strategy and priorities for her action.

2. Furthermore, she must prepare herself for the consequences of action she takes. There is always an element of unknown when we deal with consequences, and the fear of the unknown affects the strategy and priorities of action. Yet, what can be known about

consequences might be liberating and inspiring. Doing the right thing is often an act of faith.

These two points come repeatedly to the front when moral decisions are made, and it is our intent here to elaborate on them. In the first part of this essay we define a moral issue, and in the second part we discuss how to manage a moral issue.

Defining a Moral Issue

What is a Moral Issue? A moral issue can be defined as a problem, dilemma or a condition resulting from a direct threat to the three fundamental constituents of the moral structure of life: human nature, human moral values, and human rights. This means that whenever an action, attitude, or a word attacks human dignity, limits religious experience, violates the free exercise of conscience and self-determination, and impairs reasoning powers, then such an action, attitude or word is morally reprehensible. This is so because such factors as human dignity, religiosity, conscience, freedom and reason are the essential attributes of human beings and an assault on them threatens the human quality of both the attacker and the victim. The sense of "belonging together," or the sense of identity, which depends on the affirmation of others, is diminished.¹ That is what de-humanization is. That is when the image of God is altered. That is what immorality is, and that is when an issue becomes a moral issue.

Another avenue for entering the moral realm of human existence is through human values. The Bible indicates that God endowed His creation with good things (values) such as beauty, good food (Gen 2:9), fertility and order (Gen 1:21, 22). However, human beings received special treatment. Their unique capacities required a more favorable context than plants and animals. In order to reach their full potential, humans needed specifically human values, such as companionship and caring (Gen 2:18), loyalty, security and intimacy (Gen 2:23, 24), freedom, peace and integrity (Gen 2:15-17). The access to these values was free and unrestricted. God remained the owner of everything and humans became the beneficiaries.

However, when an action, attitude or word restricts the free access to, and enjoyment of, human values, thus jeopardizing this essential human need such conduct is immoral and we are faced

with a moral issue. For example, no good and loving person should willfully behave in a deceitful way, because the frame of reference is falsified, and human relations become impossible. When Mr. Cheat embezzles money, he appropriates what belongs to Melanie and other investors. She does not have equally free access to her values and her trust in, and relationship with, Mr. Cheat and the company are under attack. Suddenly, nothing stands firm anymore, and any future moves become unpredictable and uncertain. Humans cannot grow nor be creative under the tyranny of lies and deceit.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, God bound Himself to human life and through His infinite love became involved in the moral context. He knew that the unique attributes and precious human values could not be left in the open, vulnerable to the whims, weaknesses, and basic selfishness of the sinful human heart. He decided to protect both human attributes and human values with His authority. One by one, His "thou shalt not" commands rise as a shelter for the human family, life, marriage, property, integrity and neighborliness (Exod 20:12-17). We call this decree of protection the moral law. Unambiguously, His imperative stands as a norm for human behavior, decreeing that we have the right to full humanness and to unrestricted access to essential, human values. Whoever tampers with these rights will have to deal with Him (Gen 9:5-7).²

Thus human nature and values were enshrined in the human moral rights. Therefore, an issue becomes a moral issue whenever an action, attitude or word transgresses these rights. One's responsibility then is not only to fellow human beings but, via human rights, to God as well.

In summary then, healthy and fulfilling human conduct affirms the basic human dimensions of life. Such an existence consists of free participation in the bounties of God-given human values, respecting and safeguarding all human rights under God.

Melanie is, therefore, definitely faced with a moral issue. Her values and rights are being infringed upon, and her actions could contribute to the restoration of moral credibility and a healthy frame of reference within her company.

The Dynamic Nature of Moral Issues. Melanie is much

closer now to deciding what to do. She knows that Mr. Cheat is being morally unfair. This moral dimension makes things even more urgent, and further inactivity is not neutral. Even in the everyday routine flow of situations, where quick choices and evaluations are required, no decision is insignificant. All choices, even the choice not to decide, are consequential: whatever one sows one will reap (Gal 6:7-10). Just like the slight and almost imperceptible movements of the steering wheel, these moral decisions orient the course of our lives.

Melanie finds herself faced with a choice that is very difficult. Only by intense searching to know God's will, and with rigorous deliberation, can she come to some hopeful plan of action. She is faced with the realization that moral issues are dynamic situations—unresolved, undecided, such issues can become more complex and often harder to resolve. For the sake of clarity we propose three levels of moral issues in ascending order: moral problems, moral dilemmas and moral conditions.

Moral problems. At the onset, Melanie's situation can be called a *moral problem*. She cannot maneuver out of her predicament and stand firm on her moral allegiance. Her commitment to business above board provides her with an internally firm basis and with a general orientation, on the basis of which to make her decision. Whatever she does and however she acts, she knows that the cheating needs to stop. She would rather not lose friends, or lose her job and her security. She would rather Mr. Cheat responded to her hints indicating very clearly that she knows what is going on. But, because no change is evidenced, she acts.

Upon consultation with her family and after carefully weighing the alternatives, she requests an early auditing of certain accounts at a meeting of the executive board of the company. Once this is done, she feels relieved. She carefully watches the events which follow. Her concern is about Mr. Cheat, his career, his family and his future. True, her own future is at stake as well, but she is willing to take the risk. Thus the problem is solved at least as far as Melanie is concerned.

Moral Dilemmas. The situation could become much more difficult for Melanie. A *moral dilemma* would occur if Melanie values her job security, or the position she has, so much that her

professional concerns compete with her responsibilities for moral integrity within her firm. The way out is either to choose the risk of losing her job and maintain her own integrity and the reputation of her company, or to remain quiet and secure but guilty of cooperation with evil. Compromise, in the sense of having it both ways, cannot work in the context of a real moral dilemma.

Melanie's situation does not illustrate a dilemma created by the conflict between two absolute norms. For example, if someone lied about hiding Muslims from persecutors in order to save their lives, the norm of truth-telling appears to conflict with the norm of life-preserving.³ Possible responses are:

1. Because there are no absolute norms (relativist) and, therefore, no dilemmas, any action is possibly good.

2. Do whatever love dictates in the situation (situationalist), no dilemmas, action clearly determined by love.

3. Saving life is a higher norm than truth-telling (hierarchicalist), no dilemmas, thus life saving action is required.

4. Do what your Christian intuition urges you to do (*prima facie*), no dilemmas.

5. Refuse to lie no matter what consequences follow. This is the best alternative. But how should one relate to such a dilemma?

Instead of giving concrete answers to hypothetical situations, it is more prudent to articulate principles which can inform the course of action while remaining faithful to the principles of integrity.

a. The ninth commandment does not require us to answer whenever and whoever asks us about what we know.

b. Not everybody is entitled to know, nor worthy of knowing, all the truth we know.

c. The decision of what to do must be agreed upon before the confrontation, so that all parties know what is at risk. In other words, Muslims must know that their protectors will not lie, but rather be silent.

d. For special and exceptionally hard situations, God's intervention must not be ruled out. He must be given the opportunity to intervene.

e. Instead of planning to transgress any norm for whatever

reason, it is more consistent with Christian principles to face the dilemma with a bias against compromise. After all, the ninth commandment is clear and unambiguous.

f. Such dilemmas are extremely rare and exceptional, and exceptions cannot be codified without altering their exceptional status.⁴

g. Even benevolent lying is addictive, corrodes the character of the liar, and breaks the trust which a community needs for survival.

A brief excursus is in order here. In some Christian circles the existence of moral dilemmas is challenged. If God is a coherent and logically consistent being, it is claimed, the moral life which He requires must be possible. If His demands were to contradict each other, it would cast a shadow on God and open the floodgates of relativism and anarchy. No coherent, moral life would be possible. For that reason, God has built into His norms a safety mechanism preventing His norms ever from conflicting, so that in actuality, we are never faced with a real dilemma. We might be ignorant or unwilling to be made wise, but there is actually no situation where two norms must clash. There is no issue where we are forced into sin in order to find a way out.

This is an attractive approach. It affirms, as we all should, God's loving and consistent law of love. A moral framework must be consistent if it is to work. Obedience to it must not lead us to sin. It did not lead Jesus to sin. Try as they would, His contemporaries could not corner Him nor lead Him into an activity that would result in a dilemma. Even the experience in the garden of Gethsemane does not illustrate an impasse resulting in disobedience to God's will.

This one life alone is sufficient proof that obedience to God's will does not necessitate sin. The point is well made. But I do not know of too many lives like this. In ignorance, in carelessness, in stubbornness, a word or an action may result later in consequences which could create a conflict of norms—not because norms are conflicting in nature, however, nor because God's law is imperfect.

I can think of at least two causes for moral dilemmas.

1. Our moral insufficiency. Our sinfulness, our lack of faith,

the absence of courage and our limitations blur the vision and weaken commitment. In such conditions *we* see dilemma, *we* perceive a conflict of norms. Rightly or wrongly, they appear real to us and spur us to action. This is how I understand Abrahams behavior with Pharaoh (Gen 12:10-20) and Abimelech (Gen chapter 20). The real cause for moral dilemmas stems from within the person.

2. The consequential nature of moral decisions and actions. Is it possible to make several wrong decisions which later in time produce conflicting consequences? Polygamous marriage is based on honest promises to at least two wives. When confronted with the gospel the family is faced with a dilemma; which promise to keep? The courage and commitment of many Christian families who take their stand for monogamy is to be admired. Yet, no one can deny the heart wrenching dilemma with which such families must struggle.

Moral problems and moral dilemmas require a resolution, a decision. Inaction in this context produces consequences which may create a new form of moral issues: moral conditions.

Moral Conditions. The word "condition," as used here, is borrowed from medical terminology and indicates the existence of a disturbing state of affairs with no immediate solution. The difficulty is often generated by decisions or activities in the past, whose consequences must be faced later.

Let's suppose that Mr. Cheat admits to Melanie that his scheme is not the "cleanest," but that now very little can be done. Several lower echelon employees are involved, and they do not know the extent and outcome of the scheme. But Melanie knows that they will be the scapegoats and that Mr. Cheat will not hesitate to sacrifice them if the scheme miscarries. Melanie is blocked. As soon as other innocent people are threatened, she cannot take unilateral decision. Without the willing and free consent of all concerned to take the risk, Melanie must postpone her plans. Postpone but not abandon. At one moment, however, after a proper warning of all implicated, Melanie will have to blow the whistle. The issue will remain unresolved for now and she must learn to live with it. This is a moral condition. Unwanted pregnancy, adultery, divorce, murder, etc., often create such conditions.

Problematic pregnancy, for example, is not a problem which simply needs a solution. A nine-year old mother is also still a child.

There are really no solutions to such a tragedy, and abortion is certainly not one of them. Nothing can undo the motherhood of such a child. Abortion only removes the fetus, and that only from the mother's body, not her psyche as well. Her identity has changed forever. Therefore, problematic pregnancy is a condition which must be creatively managed.

Managing Moral Issues

Just as responsible dealing with moral problems and moral dilemmas involves solving them, so also a responsible handling of a moral issue means managing it. Originally, the word "to manage" came from the context of training horses, so as to make them perform the exercises of *manège*. The trainer of the horse gains control over all its movements. Therefore, to "manage" a condition means to develop skills necessary for performing a difficult task, for taking charge of the situation. But even that involves at least two problems.

The Issue May Never Be Solved. The first step in managing a moral issue is to look at the situation squarely and admit that the issue may never be solved. For Melanie it means to pass by Mr. Cheat's office everyday, to smile, to receive assignments from him, and to uphold him in the esteem of subordinate employees. It also means that Mr. Cheat may try to discredit her, to get rid of her any way he can because she is a thorn in the flesh. As are all Christians with strong principles. Her subordinates may, as a result, become suspicious of her, with their loyalties gravitating to higher superiors.

The pressure can become so strong that one wonders: "Am I normal? Do I exaggerate? Is there something wrong with me when I insist on standing for principle? Why does no one else do it?" In fact, one might also be surprised to know how many are still standing for the right and refusing to become accustomed to what is wrong. Elijah certainly did not know of the seven thousand committed and faithful friends.

The Feeling of Guilt. A more difficult problem comes from the feeling of guilt. What if I am not standing for the right? What if in fact my action is all wrong? What if I should have known better, or did know better and still acted foolishly? When other's look down

on me, become suspicious of me, and mistreat me, but I know I am standing for the right, that's much easier. When, however, what my critics and enemies say about me is right and true, what then?

The feeling of guilt is a healthy and healing reaction to wrongdoing. It expresses negative feelings towards the misbehavior, motivating the person to take the necessary precautions to prevent its reoccurrence. It seeks to heal the breach of trust. When I hurt you, only you hurt, I do not. I may enjoy the feeling of having the advantage over you. But, when I feel bad in repentance, I hurt too. We both feel the same—we feel the right way about the wrong action. Now we are on the same wave-length and we can build the bridge and communicate.

Not all guilt is beneficial however. Sometimes guilt becomes an overbearing tyrant, creating an unhealthy feeling of worthlessness. Whether the exaggeration goes towards inferiority or superiority, the reaction becomes an obstacle to managing the issue. The post-abortion syndrome, for example, often creates the feeling of inferiority, and a new pregnancy may just be another effort to regain some attention and feeling of worth. Thus, instead of managing the issue at hand, the person creates a new problem and new dilemmas. On the positive side of managing moral issues are forgiveness and the Church as a community of faith.

Forgiveness. We are not alone, however. Guilty or not, God is the ever present help in trouble. Right through the ordeal and until the time we face the nagging, oppressive state caused by a moral issue, God is the ever present help. He does not visit us only when we are nicely dressed and well-behaved. He does not claim us only when He can be proud of us.

A relationship with God becomes crucial here. If friendship with Him is our most important relationship, then managing a moral issue becomes a much easier task. If we go astray and hurt people, we hurt God, to whom all people belong. But when we seek forgiveness in repentance, God is the very first person who releases us from guilt. From that moment onwards, the business of rebuilding one's life with humans—who are much slower at forgiving—has a firm foundation in our peace with Him; that is, peace with the one who is the most important person in our life.

The Church as a Community of Faith. Our lives are

nestled within the community of faith. Communities are made up of people. Some of them are managing, or at least trying their best. Others have gained victory. Some, however, are in the middle of trials, decisions and choices. Seen from the angle of moral engagements, the church is a busy place, and its chief function is to rebuild bruised and shattered lives. It is called to serve in the ministry of forgiveness, assisting those who face moral issues and must manage moral conditions.

If Melanie does lose her job, and if a nine-year old girl must have an abortion, both of their conditions will be managed more easily within the church. First of all, the church will communicate forgiveness and acceptance. Melanie needs that. Her professional world has collapsed. The young mother needs it even more acutely. Melanie should not get all the support only because she is suffering for being faithful, and her condition is clean and honorable. However, acceptance does not mean compromise, nor does support imply encouraging sin.

The young girl, whose condition is much less attractive, and whose healing process will take much longer, needs more than acceptance. She needs a caring environment, in a context away from temptations—a home, a spiritual home where we keep our shames and our honors, and love each other anyway.

Conclusion

Because we are moral beings, and because we live in the fallen sinful world we must live with moral issues, confronting situations which demand solutions. They are not always nice, friendly situations. Nor are they neutral, so that we can safely overlook them. Instead, they demand an answer, perhaps even require engagement in a struggle; they are intersections on the road, where making a choice and a decision is inevitable. They touch our essential human being, our basic human needs and rights. Which means they are moral in nature. Their solution will depend greatly on our understanding of them, recognizing those issues which cannot be solved without serious consequences, or those that might remain a part of our cross. Such burdens can become manageable when we deal with our self-image and guilt, and when we accept and offer forgiveness.

Christians are not exempt from such burden-bearing. "If any

man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matt 16:24). Christ's call to discipleship is a call to responsibility with the moral issues of life. But it also is a call to "Take my yoke upon you. . . for my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matt 11:28-30).

Endnotes

1 M. Heidegger, *Identity and Dependence*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), pp. 38, 39.

2 This is why one cannot reject a normative approach to ethics and at the same time lay claim to human rights. This is the Christian and biblical rationale for the existence of moral norms, and at the same time a motivating factor for Christian obedience.

3 See for example S. Bok, *Lying*. (New York: Vintage, 1979). Also L. B. Smedes, *Mere Morality*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 211-238.

4 M. M. Kis, "Moral Rules and Exceptions," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 30/1 (1992)15-33.